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ABSTRACT

Arguments for lengthening the school day and/or school year are predicated on the notion that more time devoted to learning will yield proportionally higher achievement scores. Research reveals, however, that the correlation between time and achievement is far slighter than expected. The quality of instructional time is more important than quantity; moreover, the costs of extending school time are disproportionate to any resulting instructional gains. (TE)

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EXTENDING THE SCHOOL YEAR AND DAY

Arguments for lengthening the school day and/or school year are predicated on the notion that more time devoted to learning will yield proportionally higher achievement scores. Research data reveal, however, that the correlation between time and achievement is far slighter than expected. The quality of time spent in learning is more important than the quantity; moreover, the costs of extending school time are disproportionate to any resulting instructional gains.

Do American children spend enough time in school?

Other industrialized countries, such as England, provide up to 8 hours a day in school 220 days a year. In the United States, the typical school day lasts 6 hours and the school year is 180 days. Of great concern to the National Commission on Excellence in Education was the fact that the average school in the United States provides only 22 hours of academic instruction per week.

These findings prompted the commission to recommend "more effective use of the existing school day, a longer school day, or a longer school year." But the assumption underlying this proposal, that more time in school would increase student learning, has not gone unchallenged.

Will lengthening the time spent in school improve student achievement?

Perhaps. But research indicates that the relation between time and learning is complex and problematic. First, a distinction must be drawn between time allocated for instruction, time engaged in instructional activities, and time spent successfully completing instructional activities. The latter alone has been found to have a direct correlation with achievement. Yet even here, the effect of additional time on task on student achievement is less than researchers expected.

Nancy Karweit found in a recent study that an additional 60 minutes a day allocated to reading comprehension alone would be required to raise test scores by a quarter of a standard deviation (i.e., 25 points on an SAT-style test scored from 200-800 points).

Richard Rossmiller likewise found the correlation to be surprisingly low: In a study of Stanford Achievement Test scores among third graders, only 2 percent of the variance in reading scores was associated with percentage of time on task. It is questionable, therefore, whether feasible increases in time spent in school can substantially improve student achievement.

How much existing school time is devoted to instruction?

According to Rossmiller, a typical school year of 1,080 hours may result in as few as 364 hours of time on task, after time has been deducted for noninstructional activities, process activity (distributing material, keeping discipline), absenteeism, and time not on task. Such findings suggest that the emphasis should be placed on quality, rather than quantity, of time spent in school. Administrators should strive to reduce the amount of school time that is either lost or diverted to noninstructional activities before extending the school day or year.

How can school time be used more effectively?

Gary Stuck and Marvin Wyne offer useful suggestions for achieving a stronger correlation between learning time and achievement. Teachers should show students clearly what they are expected to learn and how to measure accomplishment. In addition, teachers should set the task at an appropriate level of difficulty, select learning tasks resulting in a high level of success, employ objective feedback, require frequent responses, and ensure overlap of curriculum and testing. To increase opportunity to learn, teachers should begin and end lessons precisely on time, reduce transition time between tasks, minimize waste time, and closely monitor student learning.

What other reasons are there for increasing time in school?

Although the correlation between time in school and student achievement is equivocal, some have argued for increasing time spent in school on other grounds. According to Scott Thomson, executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, a longer school year is needed to accommodate the requirements of the information age.

EA 017 910

Many teachers likewise argue that they need more time to cover the material their students require. Others cite nonacademic reasons, such as the increased percentage of working mothers who would welcome a program allowing students to stay in school until the end of their work day. Such time could be used for activities ranging from remedial labs and gymnastics to computer electives.

How much would it cost?

According to a recent study by Allan Odden of the Education Commission of the States, extending the school day to 8 hours would cost the nation more than $20 billion annually, as would lengthening the school year from 180 to 200 days. In a time of budget cuts, funding for such additional costs would be hard to come by.

The cost effectiveness of extending school time has also been questioned. Henry Levin suggests that a district that extends the school year and day enough to raise costs $500 or more per pupil might do better to increase teacher salaries, hire remedial specialists, or obtain new equipment, since "simple mechanical increases in the use of time may not have a significant impact on achievement or other school output, and they are likely to be costly relative to their effectiveness."

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